



# Returning Properties to Residential Reuse



*Houses built by Habitat for Humanity on a former brownfield in Wellston.*

## Wellston, MO

**W**ellston, Missouri, a small suburb north of St. Louis, is enjoying recent success in restoring brownfields for residential reuse. In a community frustrated with a multitude of boarded-up abandoned houses, derelict, closed-down businesses and littered streets, a small Habitat for Humanity neighborhood has taken root. With the help of a \$200,000 EPA Brownfields Assessment Demonstration Grant and a \$100,000 Supplemental Assistance Grant, the City of Wellston, working with the St. Louis County Economic Council (CEC), was able to leverage nearly \$2 million in redevelopment funding through an innovative partnership with Habitat for Humanity-St. Louis to build 27 affordable homes. Furthermore, the influx of new families into the community motivated the city to transform a former parking lot into a 2.5-acre park. Wellston is becoming a community reborn, thanks in part to this historic partnership and a community's determination to reclaim itself.

Wellston began as a center for manufacturing, including a large foundry and an electrical components manufacturer. But throughout the mid-1900s many of Wellston's major employers fled or closed, leaving properties with real or perceived contamination behind. However, the hardest blow to Wellston came with the closing of a large factory and a foundry in 1983 that left major brownfields tracts throughout Wellston. As employers left, most of the community followed, with a 60 percent decline in population. Today, the mostly African-American, 2,400-person community suffers from a staggering 46 percent poverty rate and a 22 percent unemployment rate.

Since 1999, the CEC has identified close to 400 abandoned, tax-delinquent, publicly-owned properties throughout the city. Determined to return those properties to productive reuse, the CEC created a plan to redevelop a large number of them for residential and commercial purposes, while improving surrounding infrastructure. The CEC and the City of Wellston formed the Wellston Redevelopment Corporation (WRC) to administer the plan. WRC's first goal was to environmentally assess and, if needed, clean up these former residential properties and then turn them over to a developer. With the help of the \$200,000 EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant awarded in 1997 and a Supplemental Assistance Grant in 2000, the CEC identified an initial 38 abandoned properties and performed environmental assessments to quell contamination fears. Fortunately, no cleanup was required.

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## JUST THE FACTS:

- With help from \$300,000 in EPA Brownfields Assessment and Supplemental Assistance funding, the CEC identified an initial 38 abandoned properties for potential residential use, and performed environmental assessments to quell contamination fears.
- Habitat for Humanity provided \$927,000 in redevelopment funding to construct 15 single-family houses on 12 properties in April 2001. In 2002, Habitat provided \$978,000 to build 12 additional homes on a mix of publicly- and privately-owned properties.
- Investment in 27 new, affordable houses and a neighborhood park has given Wellston's community a sense of hope and optimism not experienced in decades.

**Since 1999, the St. Louis County Economic Council (CEC) has identified nearly 400 abandoned, tax-delinquent, publicly-owned properties. The CEC also created a plan to redevelop a large number of them for residential and commercial purposes while improving surrounding infrastructure.**

In 2001, as Wellston was assessing these lots, Habitat for Humanity-St. Louis was looking for a community to host its 15th anniversary “Blitz Build,” building 15 homes for 15 families in 15 days. Taking advantage of their complimenting goals, the City of Wellston and Habitat for Humanity formed a partnership to transform 12 of these brownfields into new living space.

“This was a natural partnership,” exclaimed Elizabeth Noonan of the CEC. “We were looking for a developer at the time and Habitat was a perfect choice. They had the knowledge and expertise of developing residential lots.”

Habitat for Humanity provided \$927,000 in redevelopment funding to construct 15 single-family houses on 12 properties in April 2001. As each house was raised, the success propelled the partnership to build more homes. In 2002, Habitat built 12 additional homes on a mix of publicly- and privately-owned properties, using \$978,000 in Habitat funding.

“We came to Wellston because there was a need in the community for rebuilding,” said Kimberly McKinney, executive director of Habitat for Humanity-St. Louis. “Today, the area surrounding the Habitat neighborhood has really come around.”

With plans to construct up to 13 additional Habitat homes in the works and the influx of more than 27 children into the neighborhood, the city discovered a need for recreational greenspace. A former parking lot and service station property located across the street from the Habitat neighborhood was chosen to be transformed into a 2.5-acre park. Currently undergoing cleanup, the park will feature a new ballfield, a playground, a basketball court, a concession stand, and walking paths. To date, the CEC has leveraged a \$300,000 Regional Empowerment Zone grant to fund cleanup and park design costs, and a \$106,000 Recreational Park District grant to assist in park design. The ballfield will be built by the St. Louis Cardinals Care Ballfield Program, a program that funds the construction or refurbishing of youth ballfields in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Expected to be completed by the end of 2004, the park will be a part of a connected greenway system being developed throughout the metropolitan region.



*A brownfield in Wellston, Missouri.*

Wellston, once overlooked, is fast becoming a place to call home. The partnership between Habitat for Humanity-St. Louis, the St. Louis County Economic Council and the City of Wellston was instrumental to the project’s success. Furthermore, investment in the new 27 affordable houses and neighborhood park has given the community a sense of hope and optimism not experienced in decades. For more information about the City of Wellston/Habitat for Humanity project, please contact Kerry Herndon, EPA Region 7, at (913) 551-7286.

## **CONTACTS:**

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web site at:  
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